

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 008112

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/20/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS PREVIEW # 1

REF: CAIRO 7793

Classified by ECPO Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Four weeks before the first round of parliamentary elections, we have achieved several modest successes and a setback in the effort to help Egypt realize a more transparent electoral process. Meanwhile, the ruling NDP has released its slate of parliamentary candidates: The list drops 35 percent of its incumbent MPs, including one cabinet member, in favor of new candidates. The emerging consensus, however, is that the NDP's slate is mainly "old wine in new bottles." Reprising past practices, many NDP members who failed to get the party nomination say they will run as independents. The NDP is gambling that independents will not do as well as they did in 2000 -- when only 38 percent of official party nominees won. (Most were eventually absorbed back into NDP ranks anyway.) Neither the ruling NDP nor the opposition appears to have made the inclusion of women and minorities a priority this year. Of 444 candidates the NDP will field, only six are women and two are Coptic Christians. Finally, the Parliamentary Elections Commission appears so far to be exceeding the low standard set by the commission which oversaw the presidential race. End summary.

Engagement for Transparency

12. (C) November 9 will see the first of three rounds of Egypt's parliamentary elections (reftel). Our efforts to press the GOE toward practices that will enhance the transparency of the process have met with some significant successes, and a setback, to date.

On the positive side we have:

-- Persuaded the GOE that police stations are not suitable venues for polling places;

-- Secured collaboration between IFES and the GOE's State Information Service, in a large-scale voter information campaign aimed at minimizing the confusion which marked the Sept. 7 presidential polls;

-- Convinced the GOE to take a more forward leaning and affirmative position toward domestic election monitors;

-- Worked closely with NDI, whose new country director arrived in Egypt last week, which is busy training domestic monitors across Egypt;

and

-- Secured high level oral assurances that a substantial international assessment team organized by NDI will be allowed to operate in Egypt, and received by both NDP/GOE officials and the opposition, for the duration of the parliamentary elections process.

On the other hand:

-- While we succeeded in putting the issue of transparent (clear plastic) ballot boxes high on the GOE's agenda (and saw it subsequently reported and debated in the Egyptian media) - it appears that an affirmative decision will not come in time for such boxes to be used this year.

Inside the NDP: A Murky Picture

13. (C) As Egypt approaches parliamentary elections on November 9, the lion's share of public attention has been focused on developments and maneuvers within the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Following a relatively low-key annual conference in late September, the party announced in mid-October that it had settled on its slate of candidates to compete for seats in the new People's Assembly.

The final list discarded 35 percent of the party's incumbent MPs, including cabinet minister (for higher education) Abdel Rahim Shehata. Two other cabinet members, Education Minister Ahmed Gamal Eddin Moussa and Investment Minister Mahmoud Mohieldin (a protege of Gamal Mubarak) failed to secure the NDP's support for their bids to seek parliamentary seats. (The official explanation for Mohieldin's withdrawal from the race is that it was due to pressure from his own family - he was to compete against his uncle, the leftist Tagammu' Party leader Khalid Mohieldin.)

14. (C) Comment: We read Minister Shehata's failure to get his party's nod to run again for his seat in parliament as a vote of no confidence in him from the political leadership and would bet against his survival in the next cabinet shuffle, expected sometime after the parliamentary elections. Shehata is rumored to have been implicated in a nascent corruption scandal within his ministry. The significance of Education Minister Ahmed Gamal Eddin's failure to get NDP support for a run at a parliament seat is less clear cut - he is generally viewed as a reform-minded technocrat in synch with the message of the "new NDP." On the other hand, Gamal Mubarak ally Hossam Badrawy has long sought a seat in the cabinet and, as chairman of the People's Assembly's Education Committee, would be a natural choice to succeed Gamal Eddin. We doubt that Investment Minister Mohieldin's aborted campaign will cause any damage to his career, given the high marks he continues to receive, at home and abroad, for his role in promoting structural economic reforms. End comment.

15. (C) Gamal Mubarak asserted to us earlier this fall that the party's candidate selection would yield progressive, electable candidates. Instead, the results of the party's opaque selection process, referred to in NDP parlance as an "electoral college" (apparently a combination of internal straw-polling and back-room deals) seemed to demonstrate the continuing influence of "old guard" machine politicians like Kamal El-Shazly and Safwat El-Sherif, the party's Deputy Secretary-General and Secretary-General, respectively. The

SIPDIS
bases for selection, the NDP officials insist to us, were electability and adherence to the party's vision for a new, modernist Egypt.

Old Wine, New Bottles?

16. (C) Despite the party's "New Thinking" fanfare, the emerging consensus among those analyzing the NDP's new fall line up is that the group is merely "old wine in new bottles," in the words of a senior judicial contact. Even the pro-government Al-Ahram Weekly declared the "Party's Old Guard Prevails" in reporting the new slate. Observers have been quick to point out that the party's veteran old guard stalwarts Kamal El-Shazly, Zakaria Azmy, and even the disgraced former Agriculture Minister Youssef Wally have all gotten the nod as NDP parliamentary candidates.

17. (C) While the nominations of neither Shazly nor Azmy are surprising, given their continuing proximity to Mubarak and their long and deep history with him, Wally's nomination is arguably more puzzling - in the context of continuing controversy over scandals which occurred on his watch, including the importation of dangerous pesticides blamed for the tainted watermelons which reportedly hospitalized scores of Egyptians this summer. A number of commentators in the Egyptian press have been quick to point out that many among the NDP's new candidates are in fact veterans of old school politics and were members of the 1995-2000 parliament.

18. (C) Comment: We believe the old guard - new guard dichotomy in discussing intra-NDP dynamics is becoming less relevant. Gamal Mubarak's grip on the ruling party appears stronger than it ever has been. Old guard figures like Shazly and Safwat, rather than suffering the humiliating displacement some predicted, have retained their positions and increasingly seemed "on message" and in step with Gamal in their public actions and statements. To the extent that they represented competing factions in the past (a subject of vigorous debate among Egypt watchers), they have clearly put aside their differences in the interest of expediency, at least until the parliamentary elections are settled. End comment.

Independents: The X Factor

19. (C) Almost all of the NDP incumbents displaced by this year's process, and many others, have vowed to run for seats as independents this year. Clearly, the NDP's nightmare scenario is a repeat of the 2000 elections, in which NDP nominees took only 38 percent of the seats they were competing for. The ruling party only retained its crushing

majority in parliament after it wooed the victorious MPs back into the tent after the elections. This year, senior NDP official (and Mubarak's chief of staff) Zakaria Azmy, has announced that "NDP renegades" - party members who run for office against official nominees - will not be welcome to return to the party, even if they prevail. We suspect this position could become more malleable should the NDP's nominees perform worse across the board than the party leadership hopes.

Diversity 2005: A Non-Issue

10. (C) One troubling early indicator from the slates of candidates that have been published so far is the dearth of women candidates. The NDP, for example, has six women candidates out of 444. The united opposition front does only slightly better, so far, with seven women on a slate of 222. The NDP has gone even lighter on its selection of candidates from the Coptic Christian minority, which makes up 7-10 percent of the population. Bishop Morcos of Shubra al-Khaima, an Embassy contact and senior member of the Coptic Orthodox Church, was quoted in the Arabic media as warning that the exclusion of Copts was a "bad way to reward the church." (Comment: Morcos was presumably referring to Pope Shenouda's controversial expressions of fealty to Mubarak in the run up to the September 7 Presidential Election, which some had speculated would be "rewarded" with unspecified gestures to the Christian community later on. End comment.)

Parliamentary Elections Commission

11. (C) In contrast to the performance of the Presidential Election Commission (PrEC)--widely criticized for its imperious style and lack of accountability--the Parliamentary Election Commission (PaEC) appears to be off to a better start. The PaEC, which is chaired by Minister of Justice Mahmoud Aboul Leil, has signaled that it will allow domestic civil society monitors to observe both voting and vote counting. By contrast, the PrEC refused to allow civil society monitor access until mid-way through voting day, a decision that led to confusion and additional loss of credibility. In addition, the PaEC has publicized its communications with manufacturers of transparent ballot boxes, and also noted that it is exploring a local procurement of boxes from Egyptian suppliers. However, as noted above, all indications are that an affirmative decision in time for the GOE to deploy the boxes this year seems more and more unlikely.

RICCIARDONE